

# The Alexander Thomson Society NEWSLETTER

Nº17, NOVEMBER 1996

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## The Death of Busby House



**I**N FEBRUARY 1961, the late Frank Worsdall wrote to the *Eastwood Mercury* and *Advertiser* pleading for someone to come to the rescue of Busby House, "an unpretentious building" originally built around 1796, but to which Alexander Thomson added an extension. His plea was in vain, and the house was demolished. **Colin McKellar** has been researching its past.

"Busby House stands on the East bank of the White Cart, a short distance South from Busby [wrote Frank Worsdall]. Historically it is of great interest, having been closely connected with the

adjoining mills, and therefore, with the life of the villagers for over 160 years.

"Architecturally, it is even more interesting, for about the middle of the last century the occupier commissioned the great architect Alexander 'Greek' Thomson to design an addition to the house. This extension is typical of Thomson's earlier style, and being still largely unaltered, is of considerable cultural value.

"The original house was a plain unpretentious building of two storeys, erected about 1796 by a Mr Kessock, the founder of the adjoining printfield.

"The addition, built about 1858, consists chiefly of a long wing projecting westward from the north end of the old house. It is one storey only, except at the west end, where the lie of the land allows for a basement beneath the kitchen. There are two principal rooms, both having fine large windows looking down to the garden and the river.

"The ornamental plasterwork is very striking, that in the dining-room representing 'Day', with a large sun in the centre and a sunflower motif around the cornice. The drawing-room represents the

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*Published by*

The Alexander Thomson  
Society

1 Moray Place

Strathbungo

Glasgow G41 2AQ



# Annual General Meeting

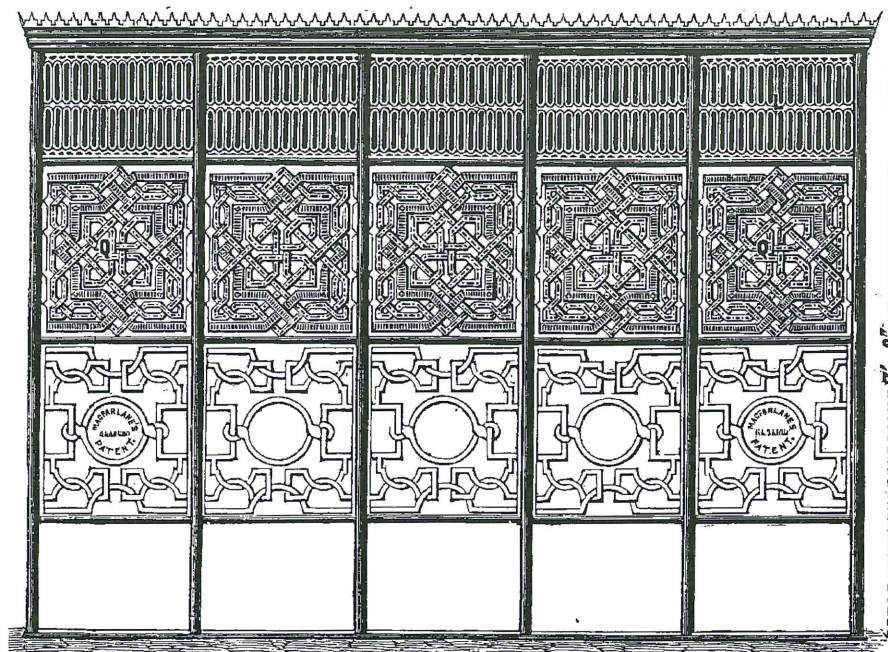
THE SOCIETY'S A.G.M. for 1996 will be held in the evening of WEDNESDAY, 27th NOVEMBER, in the Tobacco Laird's House, 42 Miller Street: the 18th century house recently restored by the Glasgow Buildings Preservation Trust and shortly to become the new offices of the Scottish Civic Trust.

At 6.00p.m. – preceding the business of the meeting – Deyan Sudjic, Director of the Festival of Architecture and Design in 1999, will talk about the ways in which the buildings of Alexander Thomson can play a part in the Festival in 1999.

Refreshments will be served. Admission free - of course.

## Exhibition: Cast Iron Certainties

Thomson used a great deal of cast iron, both for his most beautiful railings and lamp standards and, internally, for structural purposes. Cast iron was one of Victorian Glasgow's greatest industries – and greatest exports – although today the foundries, such as the Saracen Foundry with which Thomson worked closely, have completely disappeared.



Above: Thomson design in MacFarlane's catalogue for an ironwork screen.

Below left: Finial (available in three sizes, 3'6", 5' and 7').

An exhibition currently at the Springburn Museum, Atlas Square, Ayr Street, Glasgow until the end of February, 1997 celebrates the many foundries which once made such wonderful iron objects and exported them all over the world. Fine examples of Glasgow ironwork are on display, including Thomsonian examples rescued and preserved by our own Roger Guthrie.

## Cases

### The St Vincent Street Church

There is little to report on progress with the proposed St Vincent Street Church Trust as the intentions of British Telecom towards Heron House remain uncertain. As may easily be seen, this adjacent and ill-mannered tower dating from the early 1970s is in poor condition and held up with props. A future development of this site will have a crucial effect on the future of Thomson's church.

Meanwhile, the World Monuments Fund has taken an interest in the church and may possibly include it in *World Monuments Watch: A List of the World's 100 Most Endangered Sites*.

### Caledonia Road Church

There is some progress to report. Glasgow City Council has now taken on board the idea – first proposed by Alan McCartney of the Historic Buildings Trust – to demolish the redundant railway viaduct immediately to the west of the

Caledonia Road Church and so to enable the north-south main road to be diverted. This will enable a restored church building to be properly integrated with the new Crown Street redevelopment to the east.

The society was asked to comment on a consultative draft of a Development Brief/Design Guide for the Caledonia Road Church and surrounding area. In this, three options were proposed for future development and traffic management and we commented that, "Option 2 is the only acceptable alternative... we regard it as essential that new buildings occupy the area to the north as the church was never intended to be free standing. We also maintain that new buildings to the north must follow the old street lines and thus the planes of Thomson's east and west elevations and of his demolished contiguous tenements... Only Option 2 has the promise of achieving a satisfactory visual relationship with any future developments to both the east (Crown Street) and the west."

We hope for progress here before the Year of Architecture and Design in 1999 and maintain that it is vital for the image of Glasgow and for the success of regeneration in the Gorbals to do the right thing by Thomson's masterpiece. We are very glad that the Glasgow Buildings Preservation Trust is taking a close interest in this project and that the Iona Community is interested in the church.

*Continued on Page 3*



## Egyptian Halls

Progress here is encouraging. The Compulsory Purchase Order on the upper floors of this decaying commercial building was uncontested and has been confirmed by the Secretary of State. Further, temporary works to make the building wind and watertight to survive the winter have been carried out – the result of the first Urgent Works Notice served in Glasgow under Section 97 of the 1972 Town & Country Planning (Scotland) Act – but a full and proper restoration cannot proceed immediately as a grant will probably not be available from the Historic Buildings Council until 1997-98; this is disappointing.

Two problems remain. One is the future use of the building above the ground floor shops. Thomson's metal framed interior ought to be suitable for a variety of purposes without serious modification. An hotel? Why not. The other concern must be what – if any – methods are to be used to clean the stonework, given the weakness of Giffnock sandstone and its vulnerability to both chemical cleaning and irresponsible abrasive cleaning. As the surface of stonework, where not damaged, seems to be hard and sound, perhaps the best and safest course would be to do as little as possible.

## Bell Street/Watson Street Warehouses

We have supported an application, submitted in August, to convert the disgracefully neglected warehouses by Thomson and/or Turnbull near Glasgow Cross into flats. Although we made some detailed comments on aspects of the facade treatment, we very much hope that a scheme to make use of these beautiful facades may at long last go ahead.

However, we are concerned that a poorly designed scheme for flats by GAP Housing Association proposed for the adjacent site on Glasgow Cross may adversely affect this rehabilitation project.

## Rockland, Helensburgh

The society was glad to be invited to participate in a discussion with Historic Scotland and Argyll & Bute Council on proposals made for the new owner of this Baird & Thomson villa for restoring or altering the main entrance and porch.

We were pleased to find that the elaborate ceiling of a first floor drawing room[?] has been magnificently restored but distressed to find that, without the

society being advised or consulted, planning permission had been granted to the previous owner for a poorly designed and insensitive conservatory extension.

## Tor House, Bute

The society has opposed the application to build an inappropriate and poorly designed two-storey dwelling house overlooking the sea on the land on the opposite side of Arden Craig Road from Baird & Thomson's villa, surely one of the most architecturally distinguished buildings on the island – as it would adversely affect the setting of this listed building.

## Holmwood

We are very pleased to be able to report that the long awaited restoration of Holmwood is about to begin under the direction of Page & Park. A successful application for a European Regional Development Fund Grant by the National Trust for Scotland together with assistance from Historic Scotland has enabled work on Phase 1 to proceed. The Trust is also hopeful that help will be forthcoming from Glasgow District Council but an

hands and is being used to advantage, for Mr Jarvis writes that:

"When I purchased the house it was a wreck. The interim owners, of four years, had some very severe financial problems and let the house to a commune of about forty people. The house was severely cracked and many of the inhabitants were on drugs. Some of the once elegant features such as the marble fireplaces had been very badly damaged. The wooden fireplaces had been burnt, floors severely damaged, the light fittings either stolen or removed and most of the door and window furniture was missing. We countered flea infestation, salt damp, white ants, the electric wiring was positively dangerous and the garden was in a total state of disrepair – not to mention the plumbing which again needed total replacement." – And the National Trust thinks it has problems in Cathcart...

"Happily," he goes on to say, "the enthusiasm and work of my family and some skilled trades people enabled Holmwood to be saved from the bulldozer: an engi-



application to the Glasgow Development Agency was unsuccessful: the GDA, incredibly, are unable to accept that the restoration of Thomson's finest villa and its ability to attract visitors can have any economic benefit to Glasgow.

The Alexander Thomson Society has given £500 towards the National Trust for Scotland's Holmwood Appeal.

## That Other Holmwood

Following our report on that other Holmwood in Adelaide, South Australia, in *Newsletter N°14*, Mr James B. Jarvis AM writes to us to point out that his family has owned the Antipodean Thomsonian villa for almost twenty-five years. It is good to know that the house is in such good

neer's report at that time had recommended complete demolition. Since its

*Above, Holmwood in Adelaide, showing the Thomson-style extension to the bay windowed ground floor reception room (right in picture).*

rebirth Holmwood has experienced some of the great times it saw in the past.

"I was fortunate enough to have been the Lord Mayor of Adelaide during our Jubilee 150th Year and I used Holmwood to entertain the previous Governor of South Australia, Sir Donald Dunstan, the current Governor, Dame Roma Mitchell and indeed various sister City Mayors from Texas, Japan, and New Zealand..

*Continued on Page 10*



# Thomson's True Disciples

ANNAMARIE STAPLETON considers Thomson's influence on architects and designers after his death.

ALEXANDER THOMSON has been said to have had 'several imitators but no disciples'<sup>1</sup>. He may well have had contemporary imitators who did not understand the principles of his work and produced watered-down versions of Thomson's new 'Greek' style, but there was also a group of dedicated followers among the younger generation of designers who admired his complex assimilation of influences, adapted his ideas to their needs and brought them to a wider public. Much of their work was known as 'gothic', which may explain why Thomson's influence has been underestimated. In fact many of Thomson's interiors have a very 'gothic' feel because of the rich colours he used.

Thomson's pupils and professional acquaintances, of whom there were many, were undoubtedly influenced by his work. The praise he received and the respect commanded during his lifetime is evidence of that. Even immediately after his death, when the Alexander Thomson Travelling Scholarship, was set up the list of subscribers is an impressive array of architects and designers. It includes his client J. Couper, J. Boucher, Campbell Douglas & Stephenson, T. Gildard, J. Honeyman, W. Leiper and J. Salmon & Sons, amongst many others. I have to admit to having only recently become truly aware of his influence whilst researching John Moyr Smith (1839-1912), a Glasgow-born artist and designer, whose eulogy to Thomson in *Ornamental Interiors*<sup>2</sup> is well-known. This is a short attempt to pull out of the vast and intricate network of architects, artists and designers, a few of those relevant to



Thomson, and pinpoint where 'their paths crossed.

The importance of interaction between designers, the exchange of ideas and

*Left: A plate from Original Designs by Christopher Dresser, an unpublished collection of original paintings, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

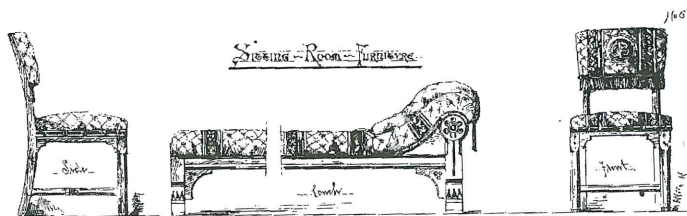
*Below: Two Anglo-Greek designs from Original Designs by Christopher Dresser. The right-hand design was produced by Minton Hollins & Co. as an 8" wall tile.*

influences and sharing of new sources and information, is too often overlooked. The links between members of this group of later nineteenth century designers and Thomson are numerous. Sally MacDonald in her article about Bruce J. Talbert (1838-1881) published in *Furniture History*<sup>3</sup>, identifies a group of Scottish architects and designers connected professionally, socially and religiously: most were, like Thomson, devout Presbyterians with a strong sense of community. Thomson refers to the group, in a letter to his brother<sup>4</sup> written in 1871, as the 'London brethren', describing a visit to London when he met with his ex-pupil,



*Left: Design for an overmantel by John Moyr Smith, signed and dated 1876. A typical mixture of Greek and Celtic motifs, used by Moyr Smith in illustrations, murals and decoration.*





*Above: 'Sitting Room Furniture', designed by B.J. Talbert and illustrated in Gothic Forms, 1867, with deep incised decoration reminiscent of Thomson's architectural ornament.*

Alexander Skirving, the architect J.J. Stephenson and others.

Moyr Smith, one of this group, has often been regarded as a poor imitator of his sometime employer, Christopher Dresser (1834-1904), one of the first and arguably greatest Victorian industrial designers. He was however, a successful and accomplished draughtsman, illustrator and designer, and his inspiration was not so much Dresser, as Thomson. I suspect that Moyr Smith as an established draughtsman brought as much to Dresser's studio as he took from it. Moyr

Smith's knowledge of Thomson's polychromatic interiors, such as the magnificent, if somewhat eccentric, Holmwood House<sup>5</sup>, may well have influenced Dresser's Bushloe House<sup>6</sup> in 1880. We need only look at the interiors of Holmwood compared to unpublished designs from Dresser's sketchbook at Ipswich Museum<sup>7</sup> and the plates in the Metropolitan Museum's album<sup>8</sup> in New York to notice parallels.

Moyr Smith knew Thomson from his assistant days in Glasgow whilst training under James Salmon I, fellow founder of

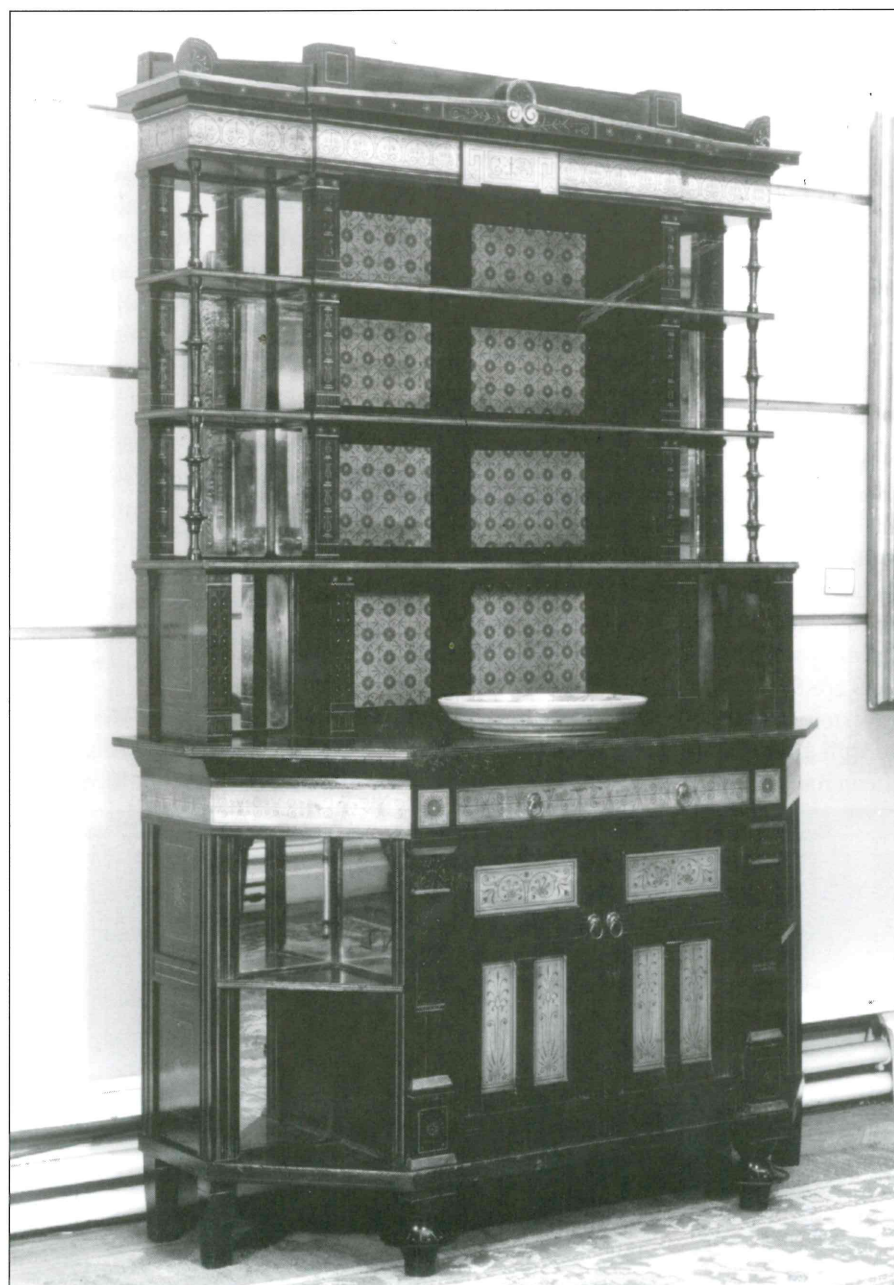
the Glasgow Architectural Society alongside Thomson. The GAS was an ideal place for professionals to meet and exchange ideas. Meetings were held regularly, lectures were given by members and visiting architects and prizes awarded. Moyr Smith attended the GAS meetings and is recorded as giving the vote of thanks to Thomson<sup>9</sup> for his lecture on the analysis of classical and medieval styles and their appropriateness to modern design in 1863. Moyr Smith frequently designed friezes depicting Greek and Classical friezes for mural decoration as in the Holmwood dining room.

Moyr Smith probably met the architect and critic Thomas Gildard (1822-1895) at the GAS. They remained friends for many years working together for *Decoration*<sup>10</sup> in the 1880s and early 1890s, still promoting Thomson's work. Gildard was also involved with the Glasgow Architectural (Assistants') Association<sup>11</sup>, of which Moyr Smith was President. Both were self-confessed Thomson enthusiasts.

During the early 1860s John Moyr Smith was working for the architect James Smith (1808-1863)<sup>12</sup> on Overton House and the Stirling's Library, Glasgow. After James Smith's death Moyr Smith took over responsibility for the library with R. G. Melvin (fl.1863-1870). Melvin, secretary and treasurer of the GA(A)A until 1864, later collaborated with William Leiper (1839-1916) on a number of commissions, including completion of the Stirling's Library after Moyr Smith left Glasgow for Manchester, and the Glasgow Gas Co. Building.

Leiper was a well-respected architect who established himself as one of Glasgow's leading Gothic architects by winning the Dowanhill Presbyterian Church competition in 1865. This was the first of a number of collaborations with Daniel Cottier (1838-1891), who shared an office with J.J. Stevenson in Edinburgh, and Andrew Wells. Leiper

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*Left: Ebonised, gilt and painted cabinet, in the Anglo-Greek style typical of Cottier's furniture, attributed to Cottier & Co.*



# The end of Busby House

*Continued from Page 1*

night sky – a dark blue ground covered with golden stars in relief.

“Thomson provided a new entrance in his wing, which communicates with both the old and the new portions of the sculpture. For the library – the room at the opposite end of the old house from the wing – he built a spectacular round window which catches the sun at every hour of the day. As far as is known, only one other such window exists. The bedroom window above was enlarged to that access might be had to the little balcony formed by the bay window. The roof of the old house was altered, too, bringing it down to the same low level as that of the wing. Picturesque iron lamps were added to the gateways to form altogether a very striking and picturesque group.

“Busby House has been unoccupied for about a year, but has not seriously deteriorated, although recently some damage was caused by vandals. The new owner now proposes to demolish this exceptionally interesting and beautiful house to erect a block of flats on the site. We have but too few examples left of the domestic work of ‘Greek’ Thomson to be able to afford the loss of this fine old building. The cost of putting it in order would not be high, and surely some useful purpose could be found for it, should it not be possible for it to continue as a private residence.

“At present, its fate lies in the hands of Lanarkshire County Council, who may remain unimpressed by the fact that this

may well be the only genuine ‘Greek’ Thomson building in their boundaries. I call on the people of the district to join me in making certain that Busby House is preserved for posterity.”

But preserved it was not, ultimately being demolished in 1969.

## Busby House

**S**ITUATED on the Lanarkshire bank of the White Cart less than a hundred yards from the calico printing works operated by the firm of Inglis & Wakefield, Busby House was the accommodation for the print works manager. In 1861 this was Alexander Miller who is described as a (calico) printer employing 440 men, 172 boys, 170 women and 82 girls. If the census entry exaggerates Miller’s role, for he was one of partners in the firm not the proprietor, it also gives an indication of the scale of the adjacent industrial activity. The Miller family were still in occupation in 1871, by which time the name had been changed to Printfield House, while ten years later when Joseph Wakefield was the occupier it had reverted to Busby House.

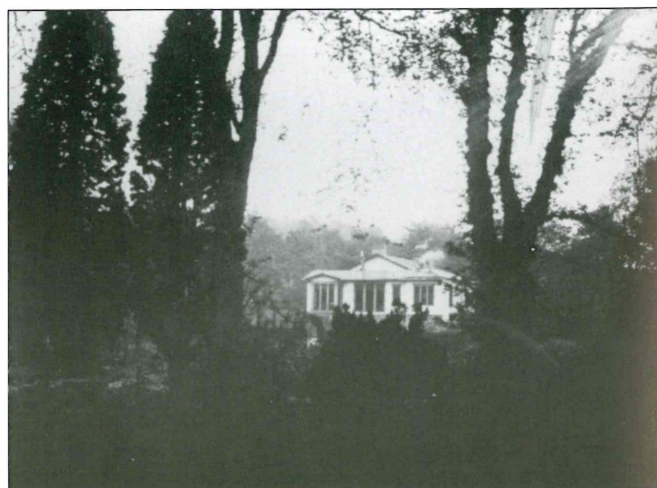
Busby House is considered, depending upon the authority, to have been reconstructed to Thomson’s design between 1856 and 1860. The first edition Ordnance map, drawn from surveys made in 1857 and 1858, shows the original building which suggests that the later dates are the more accurate. In any event the extensions had been completed prior to April 1861 when the census recorded fifteen rooms at Busby House.

Although Thomson’s client has been identified as Durham Kippen owner of a local bleaching works, the Kippen family were landed proprietors who rented the ground for Busby House, the calico printing works and several smaller houses to Inglis & Wakefield. The Kippen family could have had very little requirement for a substantial property adjoining the print works and it is far more likely that Alexander Thomson’s commission came from Inglis & Wakefield.

From 1860/61, and for the remainder of Thomson’s life, Inglis & Wakefield’s Glasgow address was 74 Gordon Street, part of Thomson’s Grosvenor building. Not only were they amongst the earliest tenants of the new building but they paid the largest rental. According to the abstract accounts for Martinmas 1872 (when the building was fully let) Inglis & Wakefield’s contribution was some thirty per cent of the total.

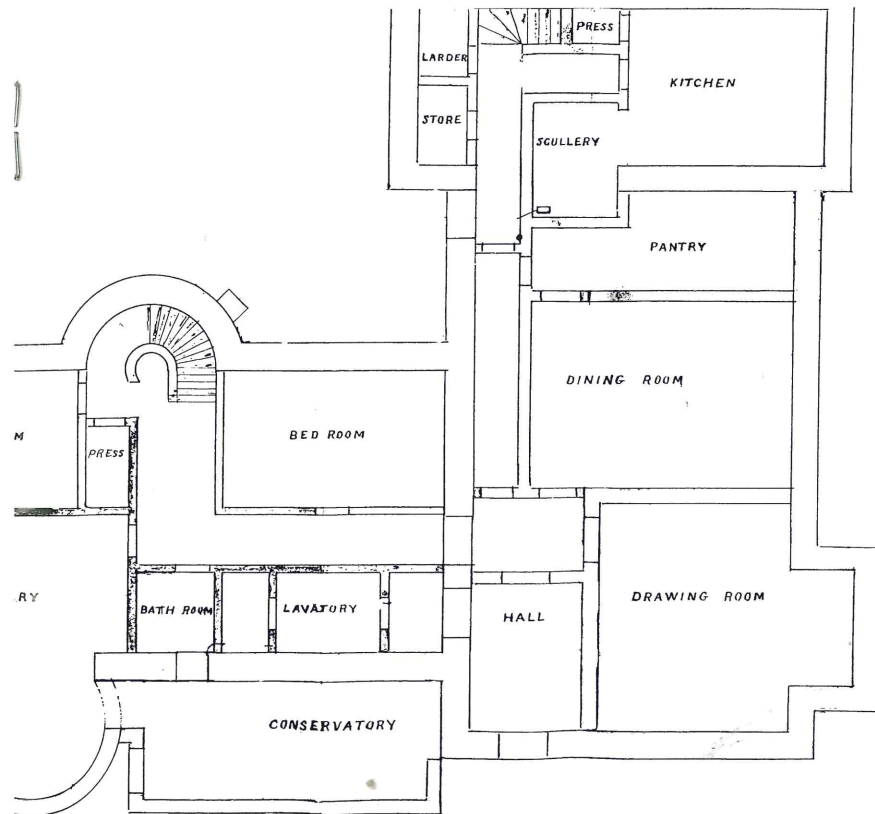
Neither Inglis & Wakefield nor Durham Kippen of Busby subscribed to the Alexander Thomson Memorial. However a donation was received from Durham Kippen’s elder brother, James Hill Kippen of Westerton near Balloch; there is no immediate explanation for his being one of “Mr Thomson’s non-professional friends”.

The original plan of Busby House is in the City Archive entitled ‘Plan of Busby House Drains’ (the drains have been





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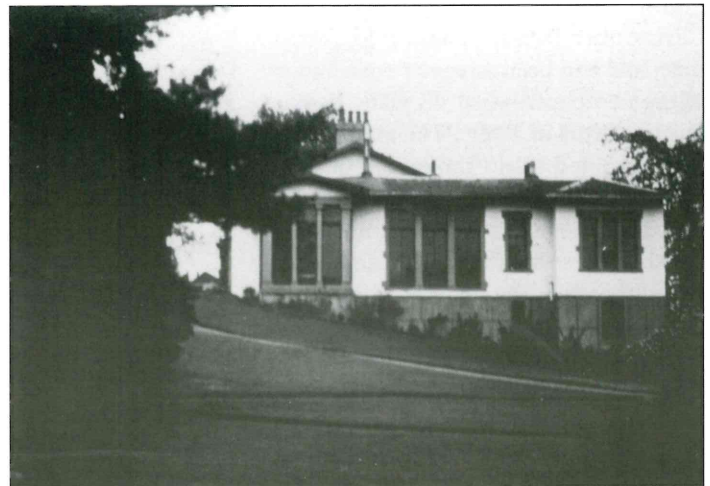
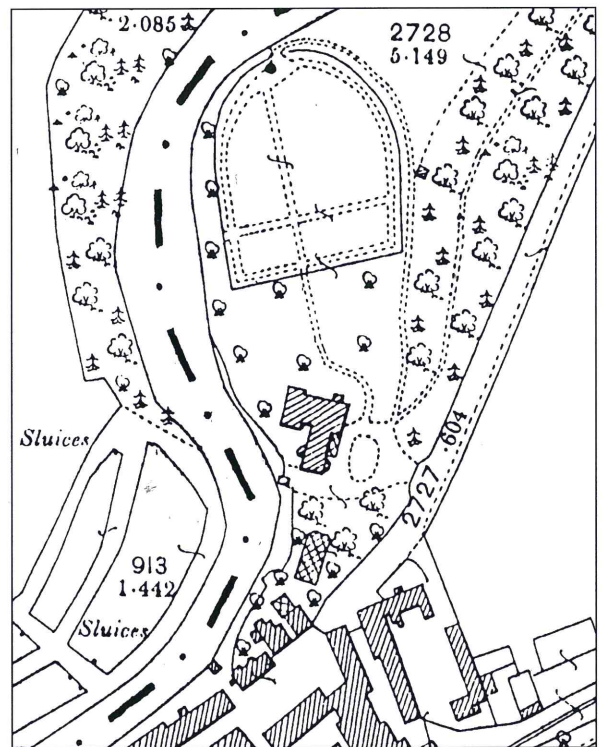
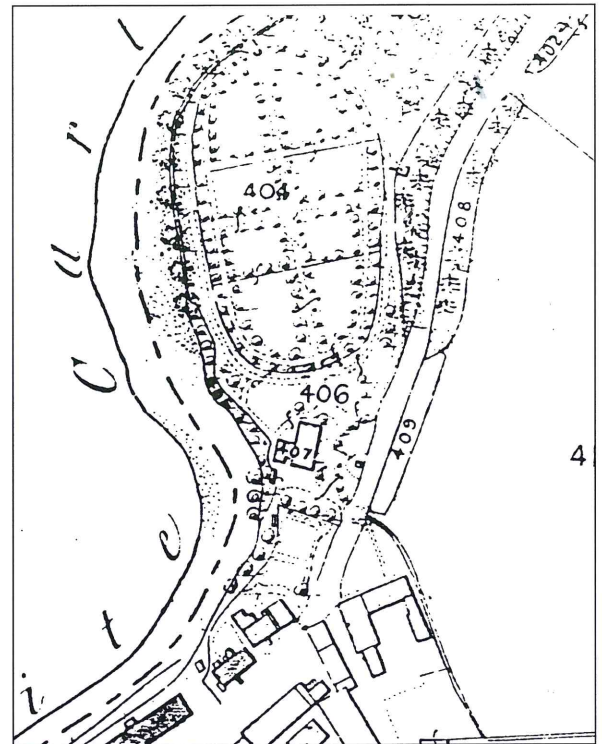
omitted), dating from circa 1923. The conservatory was removed later in the 1920s. The drawing is published by permission of the City Archive and the owner, Mrs Joan Sellyn, who deposited a group of records with the Archive in 1991 under the heading 'Calico Printers' Association'.

The two Ordnance Survey maps, published courtesy of the Ordnance Survey, show the house

and area (above right) in the 1st Edition, and (lower right) in the Second Edition (revised 1896). The original house, immediately to the south of the oval garden, is numbered 407.

Field Road, immediately in front of Busby House, was the only means of access to the print works for the labour force. Prior to the opening of the railway in 1866

*Continued on Page 12*







*Left: Ebonised chair with incised and gilt decoration designed by Christopher Dresser for the Art Furnisher's Alliance circa 1880.*

had studied alongside B.J. Talbert, J.M. Brydon and William Wallace in the offices of Campbell Douglas & Stephenson and probably became aware of Thomson through Cottier: Colearn House, Auchterarder, 1870-1, designed by Leiper, was decorated by Cottier and the dining room furniture designed by Talbert. Leiper's admiration for William Burges, and the time he spent working in London with the Goth, William White and J.L. Pearson, influenced him early on, but much of his later work was distinctly Thomson inspired.

Moyr Smith had been working in Christopher Dresser's studio for some time, and had been a regular contributor to the newspaper, when his piano design was published in 1869<sup>13</sup>. The incised and gilt decorated piano shows that he had developed a distinct style, strongly influenced by Thomson's furniture. In particular he notes that the incised and ornament was after "the manner introduced some years ago by Mr Alexander Thomson, of Glasgow, in his Greek buildings" and which he considered to have been successfully adapted by Lamb of Manchester to their Greek cabinet exhib-

ited at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1867. Moyr Smith's piano is one of the earliest designs for furniture to come out of Dresser's office, albeit in Moyr Smith's name: most dates from about 1880. Yet, it anticipates Dresser's Art Furnisher's Alliance designs a decade later and reflects Talbert's early gothic interiors and use of heavily incised decoration. It is in fact an elaborate version of a piano design Dresser published in *The Furniture Gazette* in 1880 when he was editor of the newspaper<sup>14</sup>.

His furniture designs for Cox & Son, alongside another Dresser assistant, R.A. Boyd<sup>15</sup>, under the name of The Society of Decorative Art, are similarly decorated. The pieces that have turned up and been identified, could be easily mistaken for Art Furnisher's Alliance pieces except for the crudeness of their manufacture.

Dresser's decorative motifs and colour schemes are however more interesting to compare with Thomson's. Admittedly, Owen Jones, Dresser's teacher and mentor, who had published his *Grammar of Ornament* in 1856, to which Dresser had contributed a plate, was a considerable influence not only on Dresser but also on

all British designers at the time. Thomson would have been aware of Jones's work but had already developed the beginnings of his mature style from a very similar eclectic mixture of sources. This may have made Dresser more receptive to Moyr Smith's ideas in the 1860s and early 1870s. Dresser, like Thomson, adapts Egyptian, Syrian, Greek and Japanese motifs into a new style seen in his wallpapers for William Cooke, fabrics for J.W. & C. Ward and in his publications on decorative design and ornament. Like Talbert's 'gothic'-style jacquard panels for Templeton's, you could imagine Thomson's fabrics, had they survived, resembling these designs. Likewise Talbert's metalwork has a very Thomsonsque feel. The door furniture for some of Thomson's interiors, supplied by Cottier, could easily have been designed by Talbert. Talbert's fabrics and textiles are what we would probably have expected Thomson to have designed had he lived ten or twenty years later. They certainly would not look out of place in Holmwood.

Cottier's assistance with colour harmonies for the decoration of the United Presbyterian church at Queen's Park, amongst others, was acknowledged by Thomson and their admiration for one another's work must have been mutual. In 1870 Cottier moved to London and established his decorating company. For a short time he was in partnership with Talbert, Brydon and Wallace. Cottier became an important disseminator of taste and ideas not only in London but also in America, where he ran a very successful decorating, stained glass and furnishing business as well as dealing in paintings.

Very few pieces of furniture can be said with certainty to be by Cottier & Co. Those that are, and the many pieces that are attributed to the firm, are decorated with Anglo-Greek painted and incised ornament reminiscent of Thomson's Caledonia Road Church interior and the Egyptian Halls facade. Like Thomson, Cottier used and re-used almost identical decorative schemes on his furniture. Dresser's furniture designs for the Art



Right: Jacquard woven portière, the design attributed to B.J. Talbert, manufactured by Templeton's, Glasgow, circa 1867-1870.

Furnisher's Alliance are also similar to Thomson's buildings but in a more sculptural way, with abstract Egyptian and Greek decoration in gilt on ebonised wood.

So few of Thomson's designs for decorative arts are known that it is very difficult to make direct comparisons with later designers. However, what is evident to people familiar with the work of Christopher Dresser, Bruce J. Talbert, Daniel Cottier and John Moyr Smith, who are shown Thomson's work, is how the spirit of Thomson's colouring and ornamental designs and the sculptural qualities of his architecture are somehow transmitted to their textiles, furniture, interiors, and illustrations.

## Notes

1. J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Greek Revival*, 1972.

2. J. Moyr Smith, *Ornamental Interiors*, 1887.

3. Sally MacDonald, 'Gothic Forms Applied to Furniture: The Early Work of Bruce James Talbert', *Furniture History*, Vol. XXIII, 1987.

4. From a letter written by Alexander Thomson to his brother George, 3rd June 1871, and quoted in *Greek Thomson*, ed. G. Stamp and S. McKinstry, 1994, and in *Newsletter* N°11.

5. Gavin Stamp, 'Holmwood House', *Country Life*, 20th July 1995.

6. See Widar Halen, 'Christopher Dresser and the Aesthetic Interior', *The Antiques Magazine*, February 1991, and *Christopher Dresser*, 1990.

7. Unpublished manuscript 'Studies & Designs for Silverware etc.' by Christopher Dresser, Ipswich Museums, reference R. 1972-72.

8. See Annamarie Dryden, 'Bursting Buds', *Country Life*, 27th August 1992.

9. *Building News*, 1863.

10. *Decoration in Painting Art and Architecture*, ed. J. Moyr Smith 1881-1885.

11. *Building News* 18th March 1864.



12. There has been some speculation as to whether James Smith was the father of John Moyr Smith, based on the coincidence of their surnames and because Moyr Smith took over Stirling's Library after James Smith's death. The Stirling's Library, Building Committee Notes for 1864 contain a letter from the firm of James Smith signed by J.M. Smith and R.G. Melvin, a meeting the following day records the presence of "Mr. Melvin [for] the late James Smith, and Mr Smith, son of the late James Smith". However, Moyr Smith's birth and death certificates record his parents as David Smith, spirit dealer and grocer, and Margaret Moire (sic). Nor is there any evidence that James Smith had a son of his name who would have been brother to the infamous Madeleine.

13. *Building News*, 29th January 1869.

14. *Furniture Gazette*, 6th March 1880.

15. The Society of Decorative Art first appears in the Trade Directories in 1871. Moyr Smith was involved and a design of his for the Society's headed paper is at

Stoke City Art Gallery. It appears to have been a group of designers who were unable to reveal their identities because of other commitments or contracts. The drawings of the Society were taken over by Cox & Son in 1872, and S. J. Nicholls, an acquaintance of Moyr Smith's, took over responsibility for their execution. R.A. Boyd was an assistant of Dresser's who went on to an independent career. His designs, published in the *Furniture Gazette* whilst Dresser was editor, are almost identical to those of the Society's designs published in the 1872 Cox & Son catalogue.

16. See Sally MacDonald, as above, illustration of metalwork supplied for a Thomson building by Cottier & Co.

An account of John Moyr Smith's life and career, by Annamarie Stapleton, is published in *Decorative Art Society Journal*, number 20, 1996.

I would like to thank Michael Whiteway and The Fine Art Society for their permission to reproduce the illustrations in this article.



Even the then Lord Mayor of London visited..." So when is the Lord Provost of Glasgow going to call?

## Activities

### Winter Lectures

The society is planning the usual series of Winter Lectures at 7.00p.m. on Wednesdays at the Mackintosh School of Architecture. These will be on February 5th, February 19th and March 5th. The speakers will be announced in the next Newsletter.

### Annual Visit

Next year our annual foreign trip will be to Leeds, where, amongst Classical buildings of interest, there are Cuthbert Broderick's Town Hall and Corn Exchange and the extraordinary Marshall Mills designed in the Egyptian style by Joseph Bonomi. We also hope to visit the planned down around Sir Titus Salt's great mill at Saltaire.

This will take place over the weekend of April 11th-13th, the closest to Thomson's



## Cartes de visite

We reproduce here two cartes de visite photographs of Alexander Thomson and his wife, Jane Nicholson, kindly lent to us by Thomson's great-granddaughter, Mrs Elizabeth Cook. The former was taken by Turner & Bruce of 202 Hope St, the latter by Messrs White of 98 West George St.

birthday on April 9th. Further details will be given in the next Newsletter, but the Chairman will welcome early booking. As

before, every effort will be made to keep costs to a minimum.

## New Books for Christmas?

A NEW BOOK, *The Gorbals: An Illustrated History*, by Eric Eunson (Richard Stenlake Publishing, £12.95) should be of interest to members as it contains a number of photographs of buildings by Thomson which stood in that dense network of stone streets which has been so foolishly swept away in its entirety. There are photographs of the Ballater Street Church, of the buildings at Gorbals Cross, of several tenements in Eglinton Street and also of Nicholson Street, formerly Apsley Place, where Thomson lived until his move to Shawlands in 1857.

ANOTHER NEW book of Thomsonian interest is *City Of The Dead: The Story of Glasgow's Southern Necropolis*, edited by Charlotte Hutt [Glasgow City Libraries & Archives; £4.99] as it is here that Thomson lies – in an unmarked grave (a scandal which must be righted one day). The present book contains some of the fruits of the work by a research team set up by Hutchesontown Community Council which was designed to bring public attention to the disgracefully neglected and vandalised state of this great Victorian cemetery during the City of Culture in 1990.

Sadly, this survey of the quarter of a million burials in the Southern Necropolis came to a halt for the usual reason – lack of funds – and there is still much work to do. Charlotte Hutt hopes that "the book of the Southern Necropolis will one day be completed." For the moment, however, this useful publication gives a history of the cemetery and details of some of the more famous buried there – amongst architects not just Thomson but also his friend Charles Wilson.

*THE EMPRESS and The Architect*, a beautifully illustrated new book by Dmitry Shvidkovsky published by Yale, tells the story of the Scots who were invited to St Petersburg by Catherine the Great – notably the architect Charles Cameron, who is regarded as the pioneer of Neo-Classicism in Russia. "I am captivated by Cameron the architect, by birth a Jacobite, educated at Rome..." Catherine told Voltaire. But know-alls in London – including your Chairman – used to snigger that

Cameron was in fact a fraud: he may have told the Tsarina that he was one of the Camerons of Lochiel in exile for his beliefs – and what could be more romantic in 18th century Europe? – but it fact

he was a bounder, born in London, who put his builder father in prison for debt and caused a scandal with the daughter of Isaac Ware. Well, it now turns out that he may not have been quite such a fraud after all, for he did have real Jacobite connections and relations even if he was born in London. Besides, he was a very good architect and it is surely significant that, when Cameron needed craftsmen to work on his buildings, he advertised for them not in London but in Edinburgh.

This summer I had the pleasure of taking Professor Shvidkovsky to see Holmwood. He was suitably impressed and, naturally, recognised Thomson's debt to Schinkel and, in particular, to the Court Gardener's House at Potsdam with its Roman baths. But then he pointed out that Schinkel got the idea of the baths in his villa from the celebrated Cold Baths at Tsarskoe Selo designed by Cameron, who had measured ancient Roman baths in Rome before going to Russia. So there is an intriguing, if rather tenuous connection between that earlier would-be Scottish architect who is a household name in Russia and Thomson's domestic masterpiece by the White Water of Cart via the Neva, the Tiber and the Spree.



# St Vincent Street Church, The Tau and the "Three A's"

SAM MCKINSTRY concludes (possibly) the long-running St Vincent Street Church discussion with Professor James Steven Curl.

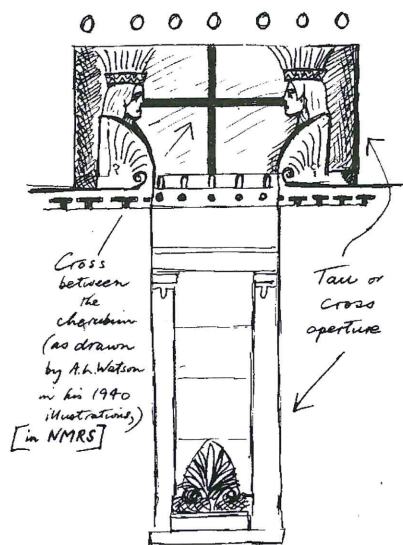
PROFESSOR CURL'S recent prickly response to earlier pieces by me on St Vincent Street Church [Newsletter N°16, May 1996] again calls for an answer. His article misrepresents some points made by me and makes one clear mistake, as well as persisting with an interpretation of the church that is at best speculation.

I shall take his arguments in order. In a giant leap of logic he moves on from the premise that the tower of St Vincent Street Church "did not just happen"[something I and others already appreciated] to the assertion that the use of the T and other arcane symbolic possibilities combine to produce a mnemonic of the Temple.

I have already explained in earlier articles why this collection of possibilities does not equal a certainty. To summarise my argument let me introduce the rule of the Three A's: 'Anything can symbolise almost Anything to almost Anyone'. In other words, it is a question of what Thomson intended to say by his juxtaposition of architectural features and styles.

The Haldane Lectures, which I recommend Professor Curl re-reads, make it clear that Thomson saw theological history expressed in the architecture of the ancients. A progressive revelation of divine truth was at work, with Egypt expressing to mankind in its buildings the immortality of the soul. This was taken to a more intellectual level in the architecture of Greece, which expressed in its structures the divine ideal. Both architectures achieve the spiritual impact they make through the use of techniques [bulk, height, repetition and so on] that came to be described later as Sublime.

It is therefore perfectly understandable that Thomson should replicate these forms in his church, to express the pro-



gressive revelation that culminated in Christ.

How, then is the Christian fulfilment of pagan theism expressed in the church? The spire and dome, respectively of Caledonia Road and Queen's Park churches terminated in cruciform finials that are absent at St. Vincent Street. Instead, there, we find an urn of sacrifice. But the cross is present just the same: it is found between the cherubim-like figures of the belfry stage. Unfortunately it is impossible to see today because it has been altered, but it is quite clear from A.L. Watson's measured drawings, kept in the National Monuments Record of Scotland, and done in 1940. A glimpse of it may be had in the picture opposite Page 3 in the 'Greek' Thomson book.

The message is that the Presence betwixt the cherubim known to the children of Israel was indeed Christ, the fulfilment of the Old Testament. All of this is contained in a Tau shape, the ancient pagan symbol [for the god Tammuz] having been adopted by the early church as the sign of the cross, something I only came recently to realise.

I would argue that this interpretation is much more coherent and plausible than what Professor Curl advocates, but I am open-minded enough to resist the temptation to dogmatism.

A couple of minor points deserve correction here. The Professor, in disputing an earlier statement by me that the T shape at the top of the tower can be read as a horizontal and a vertical space, does not see an entablature dividing these compartments, but it is there, even in the rough sketch provided with his article. And, of course, I never confused the T-shaped belfry space or the tower with an A. I was referring to the door-like structures at the base of the tower, which can easily be read as A's.

As for my "discourteous" rejection of his arguments that the top of the tower is Solomon's Seal, this was based on a reading of his book on the architecture of freemasonry, where the Seal is so generally described as to defy detailed disputation. In this connection, I expected his book to be laden with examples of churches representing the Temple, and, indeed, with something on St Vincent Street Church. This is not the case. Only one Temple-church is illustrated (at Karlsruhe, I think, from memory), where the intention is pretty obvious, and St Vincent Street is absent. Perhaps the theory on the Glasgow church is more recent.

Finally, Professor Curl's mistake. I have asked him before to explain why, if the Tau on the St. Vincent Street tower symbolises the Temple, it is there in Thomson's South Kensington Museum design. He replies that the building can be read as a "Temple of all the arts". The date of the design makes it too late to be a proposal for what became the V&A. It is more likely to be a proposal for what became the Natural History Museum. I suppose that it will now be explained as a "Temple of All Creation".

I am sorry if the Professor has found my polemic a little too hard to take of late, but that's all it was. I have certainly learned from the debate (as I hope he has) and if, ultimately, it can no longer be finally resolved, it has at least clarified some of the possibilities.



# Busby House

*Continued from Page 7*

(which edges into the bottom right corner of the 2nd Edition map) all the goods and materials also entered and exited by this route.

Around 1930, when Busby House was put up for sale, the owners of the house compiled an album of exterior photographs for potential purchasers. These photographs, which are reproduced by kind permission of Robert McC. Anderson, appear on Pages 6 and 7 and on this page.

The photograph below accompanied Frank Worsdall's article in the *Mercury and Advertiser* in 1961, and may be contemporaneous with the article. By this time the contrast between stonework and

harling had been replaced by an embracing (we assume) white. Certainly, it mirrors the condition in which Busby House was photographed by the National Monuments Record of Scotland in the late 1960s, reproduced in *Newsletter* N°6.

## Sources

East Kilbride Census 1861, 1871, 1881

*Calico, Cotton & Character*, Eastwood District Libraries, 1988

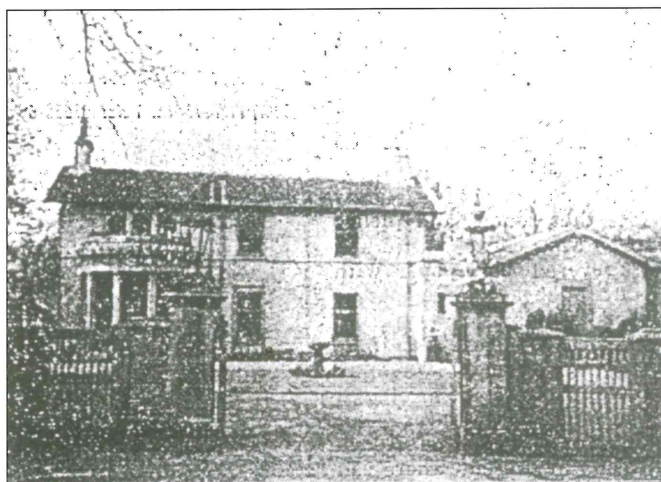
*Burke's Landed Gentry*, 1937 edition,

'Kippen of Westerton' entry

*Glasgow Post Office Directories*

*Newsletter* N°13, 'Gordon Street accounts'

*Newsletter* N°13, 'Alexander Thomson Memorial'



## Obituary

WE WERE sorry to learn of the death of Graham Law, the architect, in September. Mr Law was born in 1923 and in 1957 joined (Sir) James Dunbar-Nasmith to create the firm of Law & Dunbar-Nasmith. He was the designer of, amongst other buildings, the Eden Court Theatre in Inverness, but Graham Law may be best known to members of this society as the author of the first modern scholarly study of Thomson's architecture to be published.

When reading architecture at Cambridge University in the late 1940s, Law wrote a pioneering and prize-winning dissertation on Thomson. This he later expanded as a long article which was published in the *Architectural Review* for May 1954. So much earlier writing on Thomson had simply repeated the same information, or misinformation; Law's

study was the first to bring proper research and scholarly objectivity to an understanding of Thomson's achievement. He also, of course, had the advantage of being able to see so many of Thomson's buildings which were so stupidly destroyed during the following two decades. Graham Law's article in the *AR* is still well worth looking at.

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## The Newsletter

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